



## **A Primer for “Balancing” An Unequal Life**

**By Eileen McDargh, CSP, CPAE**

To outsiders, often our respective jobs seem unique, fun, and enviable. Little do your friends know that you work while everyone else plays. You juggle travel schedules, demanding colleagues and budgets that often require miracles. You have days in which you feel stretched so thin you’re transparent. Your family recognizes you from the picture posted in the den or else your kids won’t talk to you because they’ve been warned to stay away from strangers.

You and I both know that beneath this humor is the pain of reality. Research testifies that across all economic spectrums people are working more hours than ever before. Technology, which was to have made our lives simpler, in many ways, has added to the speed and overload we all feel. I have been tracking work/life balance issues for over 30 years and without a doubt, from Australia to India to the British Isles, we are all now united in an epidemic that has no overnight cure and costs businesses millions of dollars in health costs and reduced productivity.

What can you do?

### **Forget balancing. Think instead of sailing.**

The word “balance” implies equality. What baloney! Life is never equal. Forget the pan scale. Think instead of a sailboat. Sailboats move forward, even on a sharp tilt, if you are consciously connected (spending time) with the most important parts of your boat: intellectual (work), emotional (people), physical (your body), material (what you support) and spiritual (higher power). In this phase of your life, what are your critical connection points in these five areas? Where are you choosing to be connected? Remember, when the wind shifts, you shift. For example, if you’re preparing for the large annual meeting you might not be able to spend as much time with your family so you adjust.

### **Work on focus for smooth sailing.**



Ever look at your appointment book and draw a blank at the name “Sam”? Walk into a room and forget why you entered it? Feel overwhelmed by information, technology, to-do lists and demands on your time?

You might very well be suffering from SADD - situational attention deficit disorder. Most of us are now in situations in which we are bombarded by so many demands for our attention that our brains close down.

Consider it the madness of the millennium, caused in no small part to the fact that our brains are hardwired to respond to stimuli. Our brains just naturally want to “take it all in and respond.” It’s a safety mechanism that has us jump “without thinking” when danger is at hand. This cerebral mechanism works great at red lights and crosswalks but it short circuits when over-stimulated. Information, to-lists, and technology will not go away.

### **Turn from “SADD” to GLAD.**

1. Don’t just do something. Stand there.

Before rushing into an activity, take a few deep breaths and think. Ask yourself what action makes the most sense. What is the pressing need of the moment and are YOU the right person to do it? My biggest overwhelm comes when I plunge in to “fix” something without have analyzed it first.

2. Establish personal and professional priorities and focus on them.

Personal priorities are those to do-list items that are critical to you: family time, exercise, meditation and others. Literally block out space on your day planner and hold these times sacred. Make sure that your professional priorities match the priorities of your manager and your customers. You’ll save yourself stress and maybe your job if you are aligned with their priorities.

3. Develop horse sense—the ability to say “WHOA!”

The average American receives over 200 phone, paper, and e-mail messages a day. Take care of those that are priority and let the rest drop off. Cancel newspapers and magazines you no longer read. Ask to be



taken off e-mail lists that don't serve you. Don't zap other people's brains by sending them unwanted e-mail.

#### 4. Create a centering place.

Whether it's in the silence of your car, or in a shower, or closing your door, take 15 minutes per day to practice paying attention to ONE thing: your breathing, a flower, a fish tank. Like the muscle in our bodies, the brain gets strong in the places where we train it. Focus turns SADD into GLAD!

#### **Figure how and where to get things under CONTROL.**

Where "too much to do and too little time" is a common manta, there's a feeling that everyone and everything has more control over our day than we do. While we might be at the beck and call of others, there are still areas where the culprit is none other than ourselves.

Using the word "control" as an acronym. here are ways to gain some relief from self-induced pressure.

**Can the clutter.** Do you walk into your office feel buried? Papers are piled on the desk, on the floor, and in tiered boxes. Note that if this is your natural style of organization, you'd feel pressure by having items out of sight! But if you're like a great majority of people, clutter only adds to the time spent in finding what you need. Do you use everything that you have on display? Can you find items when you need them? If you've answered "no", proceed to the next recommendation.

**Out with excess paper.** Examine what surrounds you. What can you throw out, give out, leave out? If you are months behind in journals and other publications, scan the table of contents and keep only those items that you KNOW you'll need. Throw the rest away.

**No, not, never, not now.** Say it. Practice it. We frequently nod our heads "yes" like a wind-up toy because of guilt, fear, or a sense that obligation. Ask yourself why do you say "yes". Perhaps even a "not now" would suffice. I am convinced that if we do not put limits on our time, it will vanish with our unknowing permission.



**Talk up.** To curtail long conversations or meeting learn these sentences. “I would like to be able to talk with you but I have another engagement. Can you please tell me your request in 25 words or less?” You won’t be lying with your opening statement. You will always have another engagement—even if it’s with the report in your computer. Second, you have indicated a willingness to respond. You have merely put a concise cast to the conversation. It’s amazing how “25 words or less” can increase the speed and fluency of conversation.

**Read only what matters.** And what matters are those things that concern your business, your future, and your soul.

**Operate early.** This can mean everything from getting up early to doing things early. If you pack for a trip, don’t wait until the last minute. Prepare, in advance, your suitcase, your briefcase. The only things that need to be added are last minute items. Create artificial deadlines that are in advance of the true deadline. You’ll always feel more in control.

**Lighten up.** Perfect isn’t perfect. Relish the unexpected. There is serendipity when we allow ourselves to surrender to events and times over which we have no control. The bad weather that keeps my plane grounded allows me to complete a piece of writing I could not have finished. Look for opportunities to laugh. Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.

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Named by [Executive Excellence Magazine](#) as one of the top 100 thought leaders in leadership development, Eileen McDargh, CSP, CPAE authored one of the first books on work/life integration. Numerous books and articles later, Eileen serves the meetings industry as a popular international keynote and served six years on the Board of Directors of the National Speakers Association.